

THE MANDAN TRIBE

The Three Affiliated Tribes -- Hidatsa, Arikara, and Mandan -- of Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota

THE EARLY HISTORY: Today the Mandan Tribe, who call themselves “the People of the First Man,” is part of The Three Tribes of Fort Berthold. The other two tribes making up this affiliation are the Hidatsa, and Arikara (who call themselves Sahnish.) The Tribes believe their presence in North America is from the beginning of time; and, as testament to this theory, fine-quality Knife River flint tools have been found thousands of miles away in sites 7-9,000 years old, distributed by ancient trading networks.

The Mandan tribal heritage goes back many centuries. Around 900 A.D. a group of Indians reached what are now the plains of South Dakota. Originally from the east coast and southeastern regions of the North American continent, they began to move slowly northward over the years, following a path that generally paralleled the Missouri River. Being farmers, they chose to build their villages near the fertile flood plains of the river. About 130 former village sites have been located along the Missouri by modern archeologists, of which probably no more than 10% were occupied at any one given time.



Mandan. circa 1908

THE 1600'S: By the mid-1600's, several villages had been established in the Heart River area. This included the “On-A-Slant” village—so called because it was built on a slope adjacent to the river. It was uncovered by an archeological expedition in 1937 and was probably occupied during the period 1650–1750. It is located about sixty miles south of where the Lewis and Clark Expedition wintered in 1804–1805.

Trade was an important aspect of Mandan life: The Mandan villages acted as a central meeting place for many tribes who visited them beginning in June of each year and stayed for up to a month trading for goods. As a result, many Indians were multi-lingual and conversant in as many as five languages. By the 1700s French traders began visiting the Mandans, exchanging European manufactured goods for fur, food, and other items produced by the Indians.

TRIBAL TERRITORY: The Mandan Tribe's historic territory was along the upper Missouri, and its tributaries, the Little Missouri, the Knife, and the Heart Rivers. They farmed the river valleys, hunted the windy plains, and made large earth-covered lodges in the valleys. The Mandan are known for being the first tribe to settle down in present day North Dakota; followed by the Hidatsa, and Arikara.



Mandan Earth Lodge

LIFESTYLE: The Mandan differed from many nomadic tribes that embraced the “hunter-gatherer” culture in that the Mandan lived in earth lodgings and extensively farmed the land. One translation of the word “Mandan” is “Those Who Dwell by the Water” or “River Dweller.”

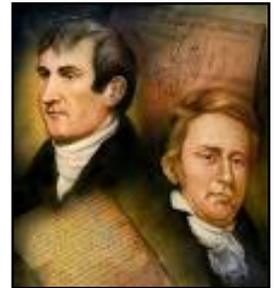
In the summer, a Mandan lodge could contain anywhere from 10 to 30 people per lodge, and there were usually 120 lodges to a community. The Mandan would place their communities in a defensive position—such as a river or bluff--so it was protected by a natural boundary. When winter arrived the tribe would retreat to a place that had trees--the trees would block the cold prairie winds and so the tribe would have firewood for the long winter.

In the village the people developed clans, which were forbidden to intermarry. The Mandan culture dictated a clear cut division of labor between men and women:

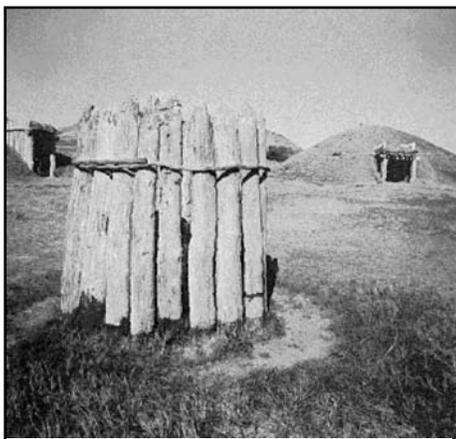
- The men would partake in seeking spiritual knowledge, hunting game, warfare, and other dangerous activities.
- Women's work had an important economic role in the community. By custom, women owned the fruits of their labors. Women who farmed, dressed skins, built houses, and sewed clothing made themselves and their families rich. Men customarily did none of those things, and needed industrious women to become prosperous.
- A woman who was a good worker was seen by men as a source of wealth and prestige. For women, work was the road to respect.

FOODS: The Mandan tribe depended on the soil for a large part of their daily diet. They grew a variety of crops to include beans, squash, sunflowers, and tobacco, with corn being the main vegetable. Corn was ground into corn meal using a mortar and pestle. It was then boiled into a pudding or mixed with other foods. Beans and corn were often boiled together to make succotash. Vegetables were eaten fresh or dried for future consumption. Each family farmed a small parcel of land, moving to a new area when the soil was no longer productive. The Mandan tribe also hunted buffalo, elk, deer, bear, beaver, turtle and game birds.

LEWIS AND CLARK: The Lewis and Clark expedition, commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson, was to explore the lands of western North America. Lewis, Clark and their party of 38 enlisted men and some civilian French boatmen left St. Louis in 1804 knowing that the Mandan and Hidatsa Indian villages were the place to spend the first winter on the trail.



They arrived at the Mandan and Hidatsa villages near the mouth of the Knife River on October 26, 1804; and they departed April 7, 1805.



Fort Mandan

During that winter, the party built Fort Mandan on the Missouri River slightly down river from the Mandan Tribe's village. (Today, the precise site is not known, and it may be under the nearby river.)

There, the group found themselves trapped in their shelter without food when a violent rainstorm hit. The Shoshone/Hidatsa native woman Sakakawea (age 15) and her husband, French Canadian Toussaint Charbonneau, saved the corps's lives by bringing the starving men fish. Unfortunately, the men were not used to the fish, and became ill. However, the group recovered.

When the corps passed back through the area in August of 1806 on their return journey home, the fort had burnt to the ground; the reason is unknown.

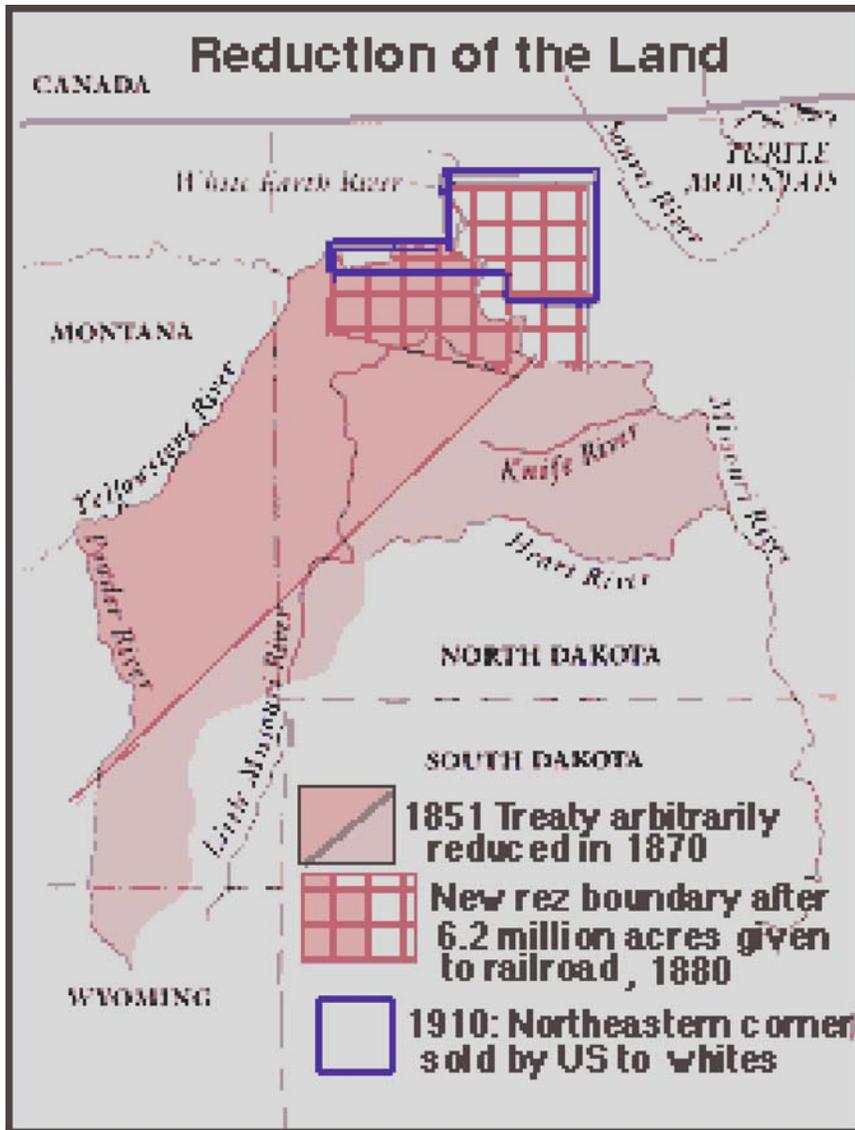
DWINDLING LAND AND POPULATION BASE:

- **1837:** Smallpox plague struck and devastated the tribes in 1837. Almost half the Hidatsa and 7/8ths of the Mandan tribe died. The survivors moved from their stricken villages and combined in one common village, Like-a-Fishhook, where tribal identities and clans remained separate but the people shared land, work, hunting, and farming the fertile river bottom lands and benches as whites began to move in at a fort and trading post nearby.

- **1851:** With the Ft. Laramie Treaty of 1851, the Hidatsa were guaranteed 12.6 million acres for a reservation, covering most of their original settled territory from the Heart and Knife Rivers to the Yellowstone River.
- **1862:** The Mandan joined with the Arikara in 1862. By this time, Like-a-Fishhook Village had become a major center of trade in the region. By the 1880s, though, the village was abandoned.
- **1870:** The Fort Berthold reservation was established, with smaller boundaries, encompassing about 7.8 million acres. Neither Congress nor the Hidatsa ever agreed to this reduction.
- **1890:** The Northern Pacific Railroad wanted to put a rail line through the southern part of the reservation; and to finance this, they were given all the southern half of the Hidatsa reservation to sell to incoming white settlers. Neither Congress nor the Hidatsa agreed to this reduction, to 1.2 million acres.
- **1891:** The Dawes Allotment Act went into effect, and Like-a-Fishhook-Village was broken up. Families received 160 acre allotments and were scattered around the greatly diminished area, but tended to form small settlements along clan-community lines. Two thirds of the remaining reservation was sold off as “surplus.”
- **1910:** The northeastern corner land was taken and sold to white settlers, over the opposition of the Three Tribes.
- **1948-1954:** The US Secretary of the Interior signed papers confirming the forced sale of 155,000 acres of the North Dakota reservation to flood them by the Garrison Dam and Reservoir. This dam flooded all parts of the reservation where 99 percent of the people lived. (By the time the dam was completed, in 1954, the actual tribal acreage lost was about 170,000 acres.) The land not flooded was the high, arid plains land which the tribal members saw as treeless, farmless, waterless foreign land.
- **POST-1954:** The land flooding had drastically changed the reservation. Their land was divided into five isolated segments. Houses were scattered. School districts were reshuffled. The timber resources were all gone.

The upland proved not only poor for agriculture but difficult for ranching as well. The amount of hay necessary to feed their cattle through the winter quadrupled; and it was necessary to build shelter for them. Horses, which fended for themselves in the bottomlands, now required feed and shelter. Their fuel supply of coal and wood no longer existed, and they had to resort to fuel oil and propane for heating and cooking. The dam produced a lot of electricity--but energy costs for the Three Tribes soared. All of this meant that dollar costs were now required to sustain their previously self-sustaining ranching lifestyle. Their entire lifestyle had given way to “progress.”

A self-sufficient, self-supporting society changed radically. The economic heartland was taken away, leaving deeper poverty and social dysfunction, which was further complicated by separating the communities. This separation caused a breakdown of families, clan culture, tribal government, and left many feeling totally defeated.



In the second half of the 19th century, there was a gradual decrease in the holdings of the Three Affiliated Tribes (the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara):

- The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 recognized 12 million acres of land in the territory owned jointly by these tribes.
- With the creation of the Fort Berthold Reservation by Executive Order, April, 1870, the federal government recognized the holdings as only being 8 million acres.
- In July of 1880, another executive order deprived the tribes of 7 million acres lying outside the boundaries of the reservation.
- The current reservation consists of 988,000 acres of which 457,837 acres are owned by Native Americans, either as allotted land or directly by the tribe.
- The current population of the reservation is 3,776 out of 8,400 registered tribal members